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ABSTRACT

A home based infant stimulation program for handicapped preschoolers in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana, has been successful and cost effective. Home teachers help parents implement a precise, individualized curriculum. Physical and speech therapists are available as well. Other program emphases include providing emotional support to parents and modeling coping skills and positive attitudes toward the infant. The child's individualized education program contains objectives related to the child's development in motor, social, language, self help, and cognitive skills. A supportive parent group has grown from the program. Other school districts in the state have asked project assistance to develop similar infant programs. (CL)

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INNOVATIVE INFANT STIMULATION PROGRAM AS BEING EXECUTED BY A SOUTH LOUISIANA SCHOOL DISTRICT

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PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL CONVENTION OF THE
COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN, DETROIT, MICHIGAN, APRIL, 1983

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Realizing the fact that the state of Louisiana has an increasingly large number of handicapped infants (those infants from birth to three years of age having serious handicapping conditions which without intervention will become progressively more difficult for intervention at school age), certain mandates were made by the state to meet the needs of these such children. St. Mary Parish is presently in its fourth successful year of providing such services to preschool handicapped infants.

It is the desire of the authors to share their efforts in organizing the Infant Stimulation Program as it exists in St. Mary Parish. This slide presentation intends to serve as a reference for those individuals who are interested in learning about and implementing homebased programs.

The "infant-stim" homebased program in St. Mary Parish has been a successful as well as cost-effective-educational effort supported by the federal, state and parish governments. It is successful because it capitalizes on the extraordinary plasticity of children in their earliest years, and cost-effective because parents do most of the teaching for free under the supervision and direction of trained preschool special educators.

The parents learn how to play and talk with their child, how to encourage him to experiment with objects, how to guage his progress and to act accordingly.

Instruction takes place in the child's home. A homebased teacher goes to visit each family twice a week totaling one and one-half hours and prescribes a precise, individualized curriculum. For example, the goal of the week may be to encourage little Katisha to reach for an object six to nine inches in front of her. The teaching method is spelled out carefully on an activity sheet so that other members of the family or a babysitter can encourage Katisha in a controlled environment. The family must keep a record of how many times Katisha tries the task and how many times she succeeds each day.

A physical therapist and speech therapist are available to render supportive services if the I.E.P. reflects the need for such. They observe the child and then recommend and demonstrate specific activities for the parents to carry out during the week, in line with an overall plan. They also describe these tasks in writing and watch as the parents practice them. The teacher, physical therapist, and speech therapist provide the families special materials or equipment.

One of the unanticipated outcomes of the Infant Stimulation Program has been the creation of a supportive parent group. A step was made in this direction when a group of parents met and interacted by showing common experiences as they related to their handicapped youngsters while supporting each other as they prepare for the future.

In conclusion, we proudly announce the fact that we have been called upon by other school districts in assisting them in developing Infant Stimulation Homebased Programs.

SLIDE

With the enactment of state and federal laws, such as P.L. 94-142 and Louisiana Act 754, the rights of the handicapped have received significant attention. In the state of Louisiana, as in many states across the country, providing needed services for preschool handicapped youngsters is on the rise. The birth to three year group of preschool children is beginning to claim greater and greater amounts of services from local school districts.

SLIDE

St. Mary Parish Schools began their pioneering efforts five years ago by initiating an Infant Stimulation Program. Services are provided to infants from birth to three years of age having serious handicapping conditions who without intervention would become progressively more handicapped making intervention at school age almost impossible.

SLIDE

The Infant Stimulation Program is based on two major approaches; relationship-focused early intervention and curriculum-based parent training. The first approach is achieved by (1) weekly home visits (a homebased teacher visits with each infant and parent twice a week for periods totaling one and one-half hours); (2) providing emotional support (intended to reduce stress and anxiety associated with parenting a handicapped infant); (3) encouraging active coping and modeling of positive attitudes toward the infant; and (4) limiting direct intervention to a few strategies adapted to fit a specific infant parent style and goals. The curriculum-based approach instructs the parent on proper procedures for enhancing motor control, language development, cognitive ability, self-help skills, and social development.

SLIDE

Whatever the activities agreed on, interventionists try to focus on identifying and reinforcing positive parent-child interaction, try to help parents develop their own goals and problem-solving skills, and encourage parents to use natural support networks in their family and community. They try to support the results and make changes accordingly. The interventionists' own suggestions are kept to a minimum and are carefully selected to fit parents' own goals and style, and are made with respect for parents' privilege to refuse any idea they don't find suitable.

SLIDE

The program is homebased in its design and has been considered both successful and cost effective by the St. Mary Parish School Board. It is successful because it capitalizes on the extraordinary plasticity of children during their early years of growth and development. The parents, under the direction, supervision and counsel of trained pre-school special educators, become their child's teacher which accounts for the cost effectiveness of the program. In addition to the special educators, the parents have available to them a team of professionals who assist in the design and implementation of the infants Individualized Education Program (I.E.P.). The disciplines of psychology, social work, physical therapy and audiology comprise the team. These professional services are available either on a direct or consultative basis.

SLIDE

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About Scheduling

Infant interventionists should spend not fewer than 1.5 hours per week in instructional time with each assigned student. Each infant interventionist shall carry from six to eleven properly identified exceptional preschool children on his/her roll.

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About Program

Our homebased program, which begins with children ages 0-3, continues as a Non-Categorical Preschool Handicapped Classroom program after children are approximately three years old. The program serves a broad range of handicapped children and from all socioeconomic levels.

Handicapping categories are not given particular emphasis; instead, the focus is placed on where a child is functioning and on plans to help him develop at a more rapid rate.

The curriculum for homebased instruction is individualized and is outlined in the child's Individualized Education Program (I.E.P). The I.E.P. shall contain objectives related to the child's development in the following areas:

1) Motor
2) Social
3) Language
4) Self-Help
5) Cognitive

The I.E.P. shall also contain a description of the training provided to assist parents in facilitating optimal growth and development in their child or in meeting the objectives contained in the child's I.E.P.

In addition, the I.E.P. should address related services, such as occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), speech and language therapy, which must be provided if required by the child. A physician must provide a prescription in order for a child to receive PT services.

SLIDE

About Parents

Parents want up-to-date and accurate scientific information, given in language they can understand, about their child's condition and the effect that the disability may have on the usual course of child development. They want to know about the emotional aspects of the condition and the way in which it may affect the child's personality and behavior. Very practically, they want to hear what they can do to help their child best develop to his capacity, and what they may expect this capacity to be. In other words, they want to know how to manage now and what they have to look forward to.

SLIDE

About the Infant Interventionists Personal Qualifications

The infant interventionists qualifications are more easily listed than acquired. They include the human qualities of acceptance, understanding, and warmth; the professional attributes of objectivity, confidence, and knowledge. The infant interventionist must be familiar with available community resources, she must know when and how to obtain consultation, and she must have a realistic appraisal of the limits of her competence.

No textbook can possibly hope to teach such qualities as acceptance, warmth, and understanding. A student may be able to develop these in the course of closely supervised experience, but some people lack these qualities in sufficient measure and these should probably not enter a profession whose central task is helping other people.

SLIDE

As we are aware, the medical and educational fields are quite different in terms of both philosophy and training and yet we are finding that, in order to provide the greatest possible assistance to handicapped children, it has become necessary for these fields to become cooperatively involved. We welcome the opportunity to plan inservice activities for parents, teachers and medical personnel, jointly sponsored by the medical and educational field.

SLIDE

The staff works closely together at the office, discussing cases, teaching skills, and information from their own professional backgrounds, and learning from one another. The team also have regular contact with professionals from a variety of fields. The aim of this organizational pattern is to cultivate a broad range of skills and to provide a support system, since interventionists themselves work under considerable stress in dealing with these families in homes and are otherwise quite isolated in their day-to-day work.

SLIDE

Working together in the home is important because:

- Parents feel comfortable in their own home and, therefore, act more like themselves.
- Similarly, children are more likely to perform better in their home.
- The health of the child is better protected.
- Parent and child routines are not disrupted.
- There is more likelihood of being able to include other members of the family in intervention efforts.
- Sessions are more regular; there is not as great an attendance problem.
- The natural environment of the child and parent may be used and modified to facilitate development.

SLIDE

The following are eight possible reasons for infant intervention:

1. to maintain normal development functioning in all areas
2. to maintain normal functioning in most areas and improve one or more areas to a point of normal development
3. to prevent an increase in developmental delay in one or more areas
4. to demonstrate progress in one or more developmental areas

For parents and other family members:

5. to reduce stress and anxiety associated with parenting a handicapped infant
6. to increase the verbal and visual inspection between a parent or family member and a handicapped infant
7. to increase the responsibility that a parent takes for educating the handicapped infant
8. to increase parents' ability to use service systems to satisfy needs of families.

SLIDE

"Parents must regard themselves as the long lasting resource and the only consistent persons who continually have the child's best interest at heart throughout their lifetime."

Lee Robinson
Executive Director
National Association for the
Parents of the Visually Impaired

SLIDE

"...Parents have to be recognized as special educators, the true experts on their children; and professional people, teachers, pediatricians, psychologists, and others have to learn to be consultants to parents."

Nicholas Hobbs, 1978

SLIDE

"Every professional who comes into contact with parents around their child has the responsibility to assume a helping attitude and to remember that he is dealing not with a spastic limb or an intellectual deficit, but with a whole child and his family."

Alan O. Ross

SLIDE

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SLIDE

First Letter to Parent Support Group Members

Welcome to my home. You have graciously allowed me to come into your homes this year and I wanted us to get together as a group before the year comes to an end.

When I first met each one of you, you said to me in your own way, "My life is hurting". You shared with me that you resented others who complained when all they had to face was a normal day with normal problems. It seemed as if their crosses to bear in this life were "diamond-studded".

I have come to realize that an Infant Stimulation Program or an early intervention strategy of any kind will be most successful if you - your child's major caretaker - are feeling well or capable in all areas of your life. You know, we as parents often make the comment that we "worry about our children". Well, our children worry about us, too. They have different ways of showing it - in the very young baby - it may be colic - sometimes a reaction to our "uptightness". Later temper tantrums when they feel as though that's the only way to gain our attention and many other ways which may be their reaction to feeling that we are not "OK" - we're not that Rock of Gibralter they want us to be.

Those of you who saw or read "Gone With the Wind" may remember Scarlet O'Hara saying "I won't worry about it today, I'll worry about it tomorrow". In each one of your cases, as you know better than I, this is not an option in your life. Your twenty-four hour a day ordeal seldom gets a break.

In the past, we as professionals have perhaps asked too much of you. We have asked you to accept your circumstances. A utopian view is to expect you to accept it 100%. Instead, in the future I'm going to ask that we work together in helping you <u>adjust</u>.

I hope that you will decide after our get-together today, that all of you will plan to get together on a regular basis. There can be plans to have guest speakers or just have informal discussions. You have a lot to offer each other and to offer the new people we will hear about who are facing the crisis you have already faced.

I thank you for coming. Enjoy your coffee and donuts and God Bless.

Kay Aprill
Non-Categorical Preschool Handicapped Homebased Teacher

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